

## CONFLICT LESSONS FROM THESANDBOX: USE YOUR WORDS

How often have you found yourself in conflict with someone who you felt was “acting like a spoiled brat” or “behaving like a child”? If you have, you’re in good company. You’re also closer to understanding these situations than you thought you were, for difficult behaviour in adults often reflects strategies learned as children.

As a proud grandpa, I recently watched my daughter deal her son, Logan, who was engaged in a normal (but mercifully rare) tantrum that accompanies the “terrible twos”. We could all learn something from the way she handled a challenging situation. Drawing on her patience and experience, she kept her cool and resisted the impulse to push back against the objectionable behaviour. But neither did she give in to it. Instead, she acknowledged Logan’s frustration and invited him to communicate more productively by reminding him to “use your words”. While this approach did not produce instant results (there was the inevitable “testing” to see if she meant it), Logan soon realized he would be more successful by communicating rather than simply screaming.

You can successfully apply this approach to inappropriate behaviours in the workplace: someone who dismisses your opinion as “ridiculous” or accuses you of being “anal”. Less dramatic, but equally challenging are passive/aggressive behaviours: eye-rolling at a suggestion or grunting “whatever” in response to a request. These can be seen as adult equivalent of a tantrum or sulk. In both the adult and toddler versions, the person exhibiting the behaviour is attempting to communicate an opinion or need, though their approach leaves something to be desired.

While you can easily (and justifiably) label these people as rude or insecure, you do better to address the behaviour. One reason you find these people difficult is because you are not getting what you need in the face of their actions. You don’t likely expect everyone to agree with you or always see things your way. You do, however, want to be respected and have your views acknowledged. What you are often seeking in these

situations is direct, respectful communication – for the other person, in parenting lingo, to “use your words”.

For example, when someone dismisses your opinion as “ridiculous”, your impulse will likely be to either counterattack or beat a hasty retreat. Instead, try acknowledging their concerns (“look, I get that you see things very differently”) and then invite them to use their words (“just tell me specifically why my suggestion doesn’t work for you.”)

Similarly, when someone sighs and rolls their eyes you could note their reaction (“you seem less than excited about my request”) and then ask them for what you need (“instead of just rolling your eyes, just tell me your concerns.”) Or you might ask someone “what do you mean by ‘whatever’?”

This approach serves two purposes. You set limits by showing the other person that their behaviour will not achieve its intended results. At the same time, you invite them to communicate more constructively and work with you to identify and resolve differences. There is a little of the “terrible two’s” in each of us, but we quickly learn what will work to get us what we want – and equally important, what won’t work. So next time you run across someone “acting like a child”, acknowledge their frustration, then encourage them to communicate more effectively by asking them to “use your words”.